THE MERSHON CENTER at The Ohio State University

Danielle Allen

Danielle Allen
University of Chicago

Friday, April 7, 2006
3:30 p.m.
Mershon Center
Room 120

This lecture is open to the public but reservations are requested. To reserve your seat, kindly contact Ann Powers no later than Tuesday, April 4, 2006.

Danielle Allen is dean of the Division of the Humanities at the University of Chicago and professor in the Department of Classical Languages and Literatures, Department of Politics, and Committee on Social Thought.

Allen has two doctorates, one in classics from Cambridge University and one in government from Harvard. Tenured at age 28 and appointed dean by age 32, her intellectual scope spans the fields of the classics, philosophy, political theory, and literature. Allen's work contributes new perspectives to discussions of race and politics that go beyond the confines of traditional and canonical scholarship and cover topics as diverse as the philosophy of punishment, the social, cultural, and political history of Athens , and democratic history and theory.

Allen's books include *The World of Prometheus: The Politics of Punishing in Democratic Athens* (2000, Princeton University Press) and *Talking to Strangers: Anxieties of Citizenship Since Brown vs. the Board of Education* (2004, University of Chicago Press). She has won numerous grants and awards, including being named a MacArthur Fellow in 2002 and receiving the Quantrell Award for Excellence in Teaching in 2000.

The past few years have seen a surge of interest in ancient Greek and Roman cultures. Hollywood has fueled this interest with the release of classical epics such as *Gladiator*, *Troy*, and *Alexander*, while the print media have been making increasing numbers of references to Greek and Roman cultures. Perhaps as a result, the number of college majors in classics has also increased.

What sparked this recent interest in ancient Greece and Rome ? In her talk, "On *Gladiator*: Does Ancient History Have Anything To Do With Modern Politics?" Danielle Allen, professor of classics and dean of the College of Humanities at the University of Chicago , set out to answer that question, and to consider what it teaches us about modern American society.

Allen traced American interest in the classics dates back to the Founding Fathers, reflecting an American desire to create a *novus ordo seclorum* – a new order for the ages. More recently, some have attributed American interest in ancient Greece and Rome to political events. *Gladiator*, for example, ends with the death of a tyrant and the return of power to the people, which mirrors the way in which the war in Iraq has been portrayed by its proponents.

Allen argued that because *Gladiator* was released in 2000, the surge of American interest in the classics began well before the Iraq War or even the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11. *Gladiator* was the most successful of the recent classical epics, and the film that Allen focused on. She gave at least two reasons for its success. First, the protagonist – Maximus – achieves success by entirely

pure and just means. Allen suggested that this responds to an American desire for a purely meritocratic system.

Second, Allen argued, increasing globalization has brought increased competition. One area of this new competition is in college admissions, where young people now must pass through a coming of age ritual against staggeringly vast numbers of their peers. Thus, people identify with classical epics such as *Gladiator* because they represent the largest competition of all, for life or death.